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ABSTRACT

Autobiographical writing can, by its nature as expressive discourse, connect to the residual orality and literacy that students possess before they enter college writing classes, because it crosses more easily between the spoken word and the written word than other forms of writing. Adapting the Ong-Havelock orality-literacy thesis to writing pedagogy rests on the assumptions (1) that all students are experts at manipulating spoken discourse and (2) that they are members of a discourse community with a fund of repeated stories, lessons, parables, and melodramas on which they are authorities. This acknowledgement of authority will shift writer and reader expertise to issues such as malleability in the presentation of self, readability and coherence, and even the psychological aspects of memory as a part of writing. One useful assignment for autobiographical writing is to ask students to choose a segment of their lives, locate a photograph as a cultural artifact from that period, and compose an essay on any aspect of the photo. For the next draft, students use a "critics' sheet" that enables them to analyze a peer's writing based on the experience of having written the same assignment. Both drafts are then discussed in small groups and in the whole class, which helps student writers explore specific ways of reseeing their writing. The presentation of the Ong-Havelock thesis to the students enables them to see more clearly their individual relationships to primary orality, literacy, and secondary orality, situating the students in language history. If writing instructors can exploit the pedagogical possibilities of orality and literacy, then the spoken word can also be exploited to achieve better writing. (Two pages of notes and references are included, and the "Critics' sheet" is appended.) (NKA)

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# Autobiography and Advanced College Writing

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Autobiography and Advanced College Writing

Autobiographical writing provides a unique and useful kind of writing for advanced writing students because of its definitive connection to spoken language. Student autobiographies, more than other kinds of writing, depend on the spoken word as much as the written word. The relationship of speaking and writing in composition classes can be emphasized by using the orality-literacy thesis developed by Walter J. Ong and Eric A. Havelock. The thesis accounts for many central interactions of speaking and writing and shows their mutual dependence. The theoretical implications of this research have been explored by Richard Leo Enos, C. Jan Swearingen, Robert J. Connors, and others.[1] This essay argues that the orality-literacy thesis provides unique material for the theoretical bases of the teaching of writing. Autobiographical writing can, by its nature as expressive discourse, connect to the residual orality and the literacy that our students possess before they enter our writing classes.

Before I apply the thesis to the teaching of writing, I will describe Ong and Havelock's presentation of orality and literacy. Their work depends on a three-part division of the history of consciousness. The first part consists of primary orality, which was responsible for the construction of consciousness before the Greek alphabet was invented between 720 B.C. and 700 B.C. People in primary orality store cultural knowledge and educate their youth through the spoken performance of stories. This stage is perhaps most evident to us in the Homeric poems, which Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord demonstrated as being arranged formulaically and thematically for semi-improvisational performance (Havelock Muse 11). Hearing has special importance in this phase.

The second stage of consciousness in the Ong-Havelock thesis consists of what they call "literacy." This stage begins with the invention of a flexible

Greek alphabet, the first alphabet that had the ability to convey the substantial depth and resonance (Havelock Muse 8) previously available only in speaking. The invention of the Greek alphabet brought about a stage of proto-literacy when writing was practiced by only a few skilled crafts people. By Plato's time in the fourth century B.C., writing had become interiorized (Havelock Preface 29) as a way of thinking, or as "consciousness." This change in thinking is referred to as change in consciousness by Ong (Orality 78) and Havelock (Muse 10). Literacy assumed dramatically new importance with the invention of the movable print press in the fifteenth century, as Marshall McLuhan has demonstrated in The Gutenberg Galaxy. The linearity of print and its ability to store cultural memory changed the way that people think, according to the thesis. Formal logic (deriving partly from the inexorable logic of lines of writing) contributed to the second stage of consciousness, as did changes in the nature of memory.

The third stage of consciousness in Ong and Havelock's thesis is secondary orality. This largely electronic stage began with the invention of the telegraph (Czitrom 3), gained more importance with motion pictures, and advanced greatly with the proliferation of video. Secondary orality represents a cultural recall of primary orality because the emphasis on speaking and hearing takes on new meaning with the invention of electronic forms of communication.

The three stages of consciousness are not, according to Ong and Havelock, merely successive stages. They are recursive and mutually reinforcing as well. Secondary orality depends on primary orality and on literacy. The contemporary period relies on the complexity and the possibility of all three stages of the Ong-Havelock thesis. Ong's "presence of the word" refers to the life of the spoken word in group consciousness, of the written word, and of the

electronically-transmitted word (Ong Presence 4). The present interaction of all three kinds of consciousness is characterized by Havelock like this:

> The potential of the oral spell had been reasserted after a long sleep that had set in perhaps about the time McLuhan said it had, perhaps earlier, perhaps later. As we now probe orality in history we are probing its partial resurrection in ourselves (Muse 31).

This reassertion of the "oral spell" after "a long sleep" is the condition which can provide an important new basis for the teaching of writing. The Ong-Havelock thesis can lead to a strengthening of literacy. This strengthening relies on taking advantage of the strongly-literate aspects of our culture and the strongly-oral aspects of our culture. Autobiography connects to speaking as well as to writing. The raw material of the student writers' own life episodes, which have existed mostly in speaking, provides engaging issues for writing. Autobiography, I will argue here, crosses more easily between the spoken word and the written word than other forms of writing. It can be made to tap directly into the power of student orality and thereby strengthen student literacy.

The adapting of the Ong-Havelock thesis to writing pedagogy rests on two assumptions about student writers. The first assumption is that all the students -- if they speak -- are experts at manipulating spoken discourse (although not necessarily dominant-culture English). The habitual absence of awareness of the power of spoken language results from its near universality and the consequent response in all of us to disregard its power. This existing language source provides pedagogical opportunities in written composition. The orality of our students and of ourselves -- our speaking/hearing selves -- makes us all language experts of one sort or another. This speaking expertise, which is based on the emphasis on the ear, can be transferred to the written

word, which is based on the emphasis on the eye. In other words, residual orality defines an essential and unique part of the nature of autobiographical writing.

The second assumption I make here about student writers is that they are all members of a discourse community which has a fund of repeatedly-uttered stories, lessons, melodramas, parables, thrillers, farces, and so on that they are authorities on. They derive their authority first of all from their lived experience. This experience is from one point of view unique and from another point of view shared by families and friends who are actors in the stories. Student writers derive further authority from the spoken repetition of their stories. The fund of unique episodes that every writer has (or that every life contains) presents material for writing. The uniqueness of autobiographical writing lies in the fact that other people do not have exactly this material. At the same time, a commonality of autobiographical writing lies in the readers' familiarity with the types of stories. The shared experience provides the phenomenon of what Kenneth Burke calls consubstantiality -- or identification (Rhetoric 20-23).

Student writers therefore enter writing classes with language expertise and a fund of stories that can be transferred to writing. Transmission from the spoken story of the self to the written story of the self provides excellent writing opportunities.

Autobiographical writing largely defines itself according to two issues which we can teach our students: 1) the authority of the autobiographical speaker or writer is tacitly acknowledged by readers; and 2) the means of presentation available to the autobiographical speaker or writer are limitless.

The first issue, the speaker-writer's automatically-accorded authority, offers important pedagogical possibilities. The unique knowledge of the

storyteller empowers students. Expertise and self confidence derive from this authority. Since the autobiographical speaker-writers know their material better than anyone else can know it, there are no challenges to the substance of the autobiographical piece of writing. This acknowledgement of authority will shift writer and reader expertise to frequently overlooked issues such as the malleability in the presentation of self, to readability and coherence, and even to the psychological aspects of memory as a part of writing. The familiar problem in writing classes of the absence of writerly authority diminishes in autobiographical writing in just the way that the problem diminishes in autobiographical speaking. The authority derives from the fact that no one can know more about the writer's material than the writer. Writers and speakers relate episodes from their lives with unique knowledge. In addition, the repetition of the speaker and writer's life stories provides the student with the ability to transfer those stories to the written word. When the large -- sometimes overwhelming -- problem of authority is deemphasized, concentration on other writing issues leads to the development of writing strengths such as experimenting with presentation and increasing readability. This shift in the writer's preoccupation from establishing authority to other, equally compelling writing concerns enables students to work on aspects of writing that often they have never reached before in their writing instruction. The authority derives from the oral power -- years of spoken repetition -- of the stories that students tell on paper.

In addition to increasing writerly authority, the traversing of the spoken word to the written word in autobiographical writing exploits existing writing ability in a second compelling way. The presentation of self in autobiographical writing depends on the stories the writer has repeatedly spoken to herself or himself or has heard spoken. Ong's orality-aurality

emphasis finds a powerful existence in autobiographical writing. The connection between presenting a self in speaking and presenting a self in writing is much closer in autobiographical writing than in other kinds of writing and therefore shows students ways to manipulate ethos, arguably one of the most important issues in writing and in speaking but certainly a center of both spoken and written presentation.

Ethos is one of Aristotle's three interior persuaders presented in the Rhetoric. What I translate as "interior persuaders" from the pisteis are conventionally translated as "artistic proofs" or "artificial proofs." This translation loses much of its original Greek power because it bypasses the crucial distinction of pistis as persuasion, as a way of engendering belief. The translation of "pistis" as "proof" connects this crucial concept more closely to Anglo-American empiricism than to Aristotle's analysis of the means of persuasion. The three interior persuaders consist of ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos is the general idea of a writer or a speaker's general character. It is crafted both in speaking and in writing. Pathos is persuasion relying on an appeal to emotions, while logos is persuasion relying on an appeal to reason (Aristotle 9-10). Aristotle goes so far as to say that ethos may be the most powerful of these persuaders (9). The presentation of self - ethos -- sets up the conditions of belief in any spoken or written discourse.

Ethos, then, is a presentation of a self that engenders belief. Believability is the reason Aristotle applied the complex notion of pistis to ethos: persuasion of one's hearers or speakers depends on enabling the audience to interiorize the speaker-writer's material. This capability -- manipulating presentation for specific purposes -- is the cornerstone of both effective speaking and writing. Ethos determines the success of presentation to a great extent.

A Sequence of Assignments for Autobiographical Writing

One useful assignment for autobiographical writing is to choose one segment of the writer's life -- for example, sometime between the first and sixth grades -- and to locate a photograph from that period. The writer is asked to compose a piece on any aspect of the photograph. In setting up this essay for students, the writing instructor can present photographs from published autobiographies (for example, Mary McCarthy's Memories of a Catholic Girlhood) and set up a discussion of ways of writing about a cultural artifact such as a photograph. For the next draft, each student is presented with a Critics' Sheet, or what Michael C. Flanigan and Diane Menendez call Revising Guides. These sheets enable the students to analyze a peer's writing based on the experience of having written the same assignment (See Appendix A for a sample Critics' Sheet.) The Critics' Sheet enables a student to locate definite ways of changing a piece of writing. In addition, the Critics' Sheet enables them to interiorize important revising issues. Writers are, in other words, compelled to resee because they are shown definite ways of revising. A Critics' Sheet for this assignment might include one entry asking the critic to describe the writer's ethos, to locate two paragraphs where this ethos is most effective, and to explain why this presentation of self is effective. A second entry on the Critics' Sheet might ask the critic to rewrite one paragraph of the essay by switching the point of view. This rewriting would be followed by an analysis by the class of the nature of the changes caused by changing point of view.

Both drafts of these essays are discussed in small writing groups and in the class as a whole. The probing of these writing issues allows student writers to discover specific ways of reseeing their writing. The nature of

their authority as writers is able to expand as a result of the use of autobiographical writing, and they are offered a variety of responses to their presentations of self.

One of the major discoveries students make with the Critics' Sheets is their ability to make transitions from ear dominance to eye dominance. They see how both the eye and the ear work in drafting. Writing moves from resembling the spoken to enacting the written. For example, first drafts often contain residually oral material such as platitudes and dead metaphors that can be recast in subsequent drafts.

The presentation of the Ong-Havelock thesis to the students enables them to see more clearly their individual relationships to primary orality, literacy, and secondary orality. The thesis also situates student writers in language history. They acquire permission to write with more authority and to experiment with presentation of self through working with ethos. Only recently, according to Ong, have we been able to become aware of the enormous changes brought on by changes in media dominance. Only since secondary orality began, about one hundred years ago, have we been able to see the power of literacy. With this new and probably revolutionary perspective we are afforded many opportunities in the teaching of writing that we had not known about before the research on orality and literacy.

The connection of autobiography and writing instruction via the theory of orality and literacy presents a relatively new framework that depends on speaking and writing consciousness that all the members of our culture share. This framework depends on the recognition that advanced language ability is already present in all our student writers. If writing instructors can exploit the pedagogical possibilities of orality and literacy, we can exploit the spoken word more precisely to achieve better writing. When we then present our

own understanding of the connections between speaking and writing, we are able to find -- to echo Aristotle -- one of the most powerful means of persuasion in the particular case for showing students how to think in writing. (Aristotle 1). We can show our students the interaction of speaking and writing.

## Notes

1. See Enos, review of Eric A. Havelock, The Muse Learns to Write. Forthcoming in Rhetoric Society Quarterly; Swearingen, "The Rhetor as Eiron: Plato's Defense of Dialogue." Pre/Text 3 (1982) 289-336 and Connors,"Greek Rhetoric and the Transition From Orality." Philosophy and Rhetoric 19 (No. 1) 1986.

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Appendix A

Critics' Sheet

for a Course in

Autobiographical Writing

1. Describe the writer's ethos. Locate two paragraphs where this ethos is most effective. Elaborate on why this presentation of self is effective.

2. If you had the opportunity to rewrite this essay using a different ethos, what would it be? Why?

3. Rewrite one paragraph of this essay by switching the point of view. For example, if the writer uses first person point of view, convert it to third person point of view. Analyze the nature of the changes in the writing produced by your change.

4. Identify the bin language in this essay: locate uses of overgeneralization, dead metaphor, platitude, and cliche. In two of these cases, explain how the use of bin language helped the writer in this early draft and why these sections need to be revised.